

The Downside of Head-of-the-Line Privileges

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Land ho! After four months in the Indian Ocean, we were hitting our first liberty port—Phuket, Thailand. Because it was the monsoon season, the weather was wet and windy, which forced us to anchor the ship on the other side of a peninsula, a few miles from Patong Beach.

Once the anchor was set, the sea-and-anchor detail secured, and the quarterdeck watch stationed, the OOD ordered, “Away the gig, away!” As the gig headed toward the beach with our CO, who had to meet some dignitaries, a line of liberty-loving Sailors looped around the ship’s main deck.

“Where are the liberty boats?” we wondered. As we learned, the crews on the contracted liberty boats hadn’t gotten word right away about our last-minute anchoring change. It would take them two hours to reach the ship and start hauling us ashore.

The thought of having to wait that long to enjoy a cold beer with some hot Thai barbecue on the beach was more than the junior officers (JOs) could stand. They summoned the duty boatswain’s mate, and, in five minutes, the ship’s motor whaleboat was in the water, racing to shore with a full load of JOs.

The envy in our eyes soon vanished when thick clouds darkened the horizon. Moments later, rain was pouring, and a haze had settled around the ship. We stared into the haze and soon saw the boat-load of JOs heading back to the ship. They were drenched from head to foot, which probably explains why they didn’t smile or say anything when we greeted them with, “Welcome back aboard!” They simply trudged below decks for showers and dry clothes, then returned to their spot at the head of the line waiting for the liberty boats to arrive.



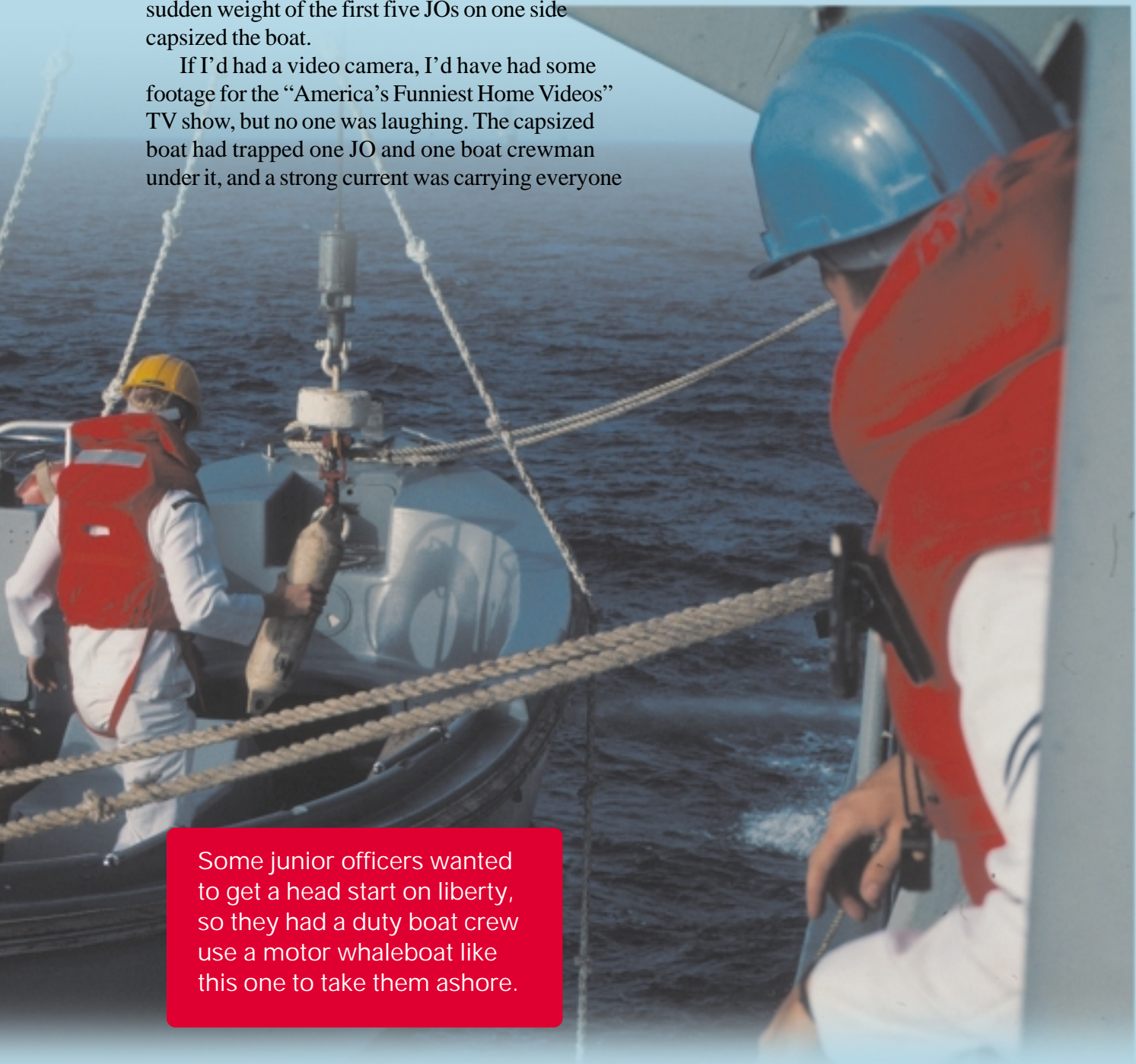
When the first small, wooden boat came alongside, it was loaded with fresh bananas, papayas and other local fruits our MSC had ordered for the crew. It didn't take a working party very long to unload the boxes, but the JOs weren't in the mood for any kind of delay. As soon as the last box was unloaded and the operator signaled the OOD he was ready to take people ashore, the JOs rushed down the ladder. Full of excitement, the first five ran to the starboard side to make room for their peers and a few enlisted people. These latter passengers, however, never had a chance to board because the sudden weight of the first five JOs on one side capsized the boat.

If I'd had a video camera, I'd have had some footage for the "America's Funniest Home Videos" TV show, but no one was laughing. The capsized boat had trapped one JO and one boat crewman under it, and a strong current was carrying everyone

else away from the ship. As the OOD called away "man overboard," other shipmates tossed life rings in the water.

All the victims survived this incident, and everyone who still wanted to go ashore finally went. However, there was no more pushing and shoving at the head of the line. 🌀

The author wrote this article from his recollection of events that happened while he was in his first duty assignment aboard an Adams-class guided-missile destroyer.



Some junior officers wanted to get a head start on liberty, so they had a duty boat crew use a motor whaleboat like this one to take them ashore.